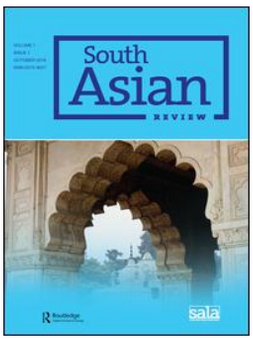

South Asian Review

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rsoa20

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To cite this article: Mohamad Junaid (2021): From a Distant Shore to the War at Home: 9/11 and Kashmir, South Asian Review, DOI: 10.1080/02759527.2021.1899523

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2021.1899523

Published online: 18 Mar 2021.

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SOUTH ASIAN REVIEW
https://doi.org/10.1080/02759527.2021.1899523

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From a Distant Shore to the War at Home: 9/11 and Kashmir

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ABSTRACT
This essay reflects on how the dominant US framing of the events of 9/11 was appropriated by dominant states to repress struggles for freedom and justice in the name of "global war on terror." Focusing on India's counterinsurgency war in Kashmir, the essay argues that the India government, led by the rightwing BJP, systematically used the "global war on terror" to advance its anti-Muslim rhetoric, crushing of dissent, and settler-colonial policies in Kashmir.

KEYWORDS
Kashmir; 9/11; counterinsurgency; global war on terror; human rights

The events of September 11, 2001 traumatized the United States, but they also rippled through the rest of the world as a blow to movements for freedom and justice. In a fearful "us vs them" world of endless war that it was used to sanction, those who were neither "us" nor "them" became its unwitting victims. In Kashmir, brutalized by decades of state violence, the crude and one-dimensional polemic of "War on Terror" gave the Indian state almost a *carte blanche* to crush the long-standing movement for self-determination.

It is odd, but like many others, I can exactly recall where I was and what I was thinking at the time of the 9/11 attacks. Watching the twin towers fall, from a library computer at my university in North India, I remember the news commentators repeatedly speaking about the towers as symbols of "American power" and "American pride," instead of what they were, buildings full of ordinary people. How the US would respond depended on how its leaders wanted Americans to look at this terrible event. As philosopher Jacques Derrida would note, the event mobilized all sorts of "motivations and interests" behind the geopolitical shifts that became invested in "September 11" – including giving a "freer hand" to Russia's Putin in Chechnya and a "very hasty identification of Palestinian terrorism with international terrorism" (Borradori 2013).[1]

It was strange to be a distant "witness" to this event that would profoundly affect the far away world I inhabited. To be a Kashmiri student in India was to live with a mark on your back. Younger Kashmiris had been escaping the brutal

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counterinsurgency war in Kashmir only to enter the distrustful world of Indian universities. University authorities were often all too eager to "cooperate" with Indian security agencies if the latter wanted us – and they often did. Our parents back in Kashmir would plead with us to keep our heads down. In Kashmir, where the Indian state treated any hint of dissent as "sedition," we had learnt to measure our words and discipline our emotions. At the university, every time there was talk of war between India and Pakistan, or there was a bombing somewhere, we would just slink out of sight and hide from our Indian colleagues until the tempers cooled.

As I sat numb watching the gratuitous violence unfolding on my computer screen, I felt anger and an unspeakable fear rising within me. America, until then, had been a distant shore. There were just a handful of Kashmiris who had moved to the US, mostly doctors. In the miasma of the counterinsurgency war, they had become absent from Kashmiri consciousness. In the Kashmiri imagination, the US figured in complicated ways. For years, Indian politicians had claimed that if Kashmir was independent, it would become a base for US imperialism. Among Kashmiris, the US involvement in the Middle East was despised, yet Kashmiri leaders welcomed the occasional US government statements that mentioned India's human rights violations. The 9/11 event was bound to draw sharp new lines, and I worried how the Indian state would stage Kashmiris and their struggle in such a world.

A week after 9/11, George W. Bush declared Al-Qaeda to be responsible. According to him, its leaders were hiding in Afghanistan. War was coming, and it was coming close to home. In the mid-1990s, I had seen a few Afghan "mujahids" roaming around in Kashmir. Their jihad seemed somewhat indifferent to the decades-old movement for *azadi* (freedom) for which generations of Kashmiris had been struggling. International media described them as "battle-hardened," but they looked like the poor and vulnerable anywhere. Most died nameless or just disappeared. Nevertheless, the Indian government had used their presence to claim that the Kashmiri struggle was nothing more than "pan-Islamic jihad" (Kumar 2002). Some Western experts had adopted the Indian view (Reidel 2008), and the Western governments had at best stayed "neutral," as if there could be such a morally tenable position between a dominant state like India and a besieged people like Kashmiris. After 9/11, even that façade of neutrality would be dropped.

The invisibilization of Kashmiris from the international discourse had begun right after India's annexation of Kashmir in 1947. While the UN Security Council passed several resolutions in those early years calling for a plebiscite in Kashmir, the resolutions were never enforced. The Pakistani concession after the 1971 war with India to make Kashmir a "bilateral" issue meant Kashmir would be further dropped from international attention. By 1990, India had launched a counterinsurgency war to crush a popular uprising for independence in Kashmir. Thousands were dying each year, but it all happened against a noisy geopolitical background that accompanied the end of the Cold War. India had also blocked access to the international media. As the war continued, both India and Pakistan introduced all sorts of new actors into the conflict. The counterinsurgency turned into a dirty war and its attendant epistemic murk conspired to make Kashmiris further invisible. For many, Kashmir came to be associated with danger (Reeves 1995), not just a place where one could get hurt from violence, but a

mysterious danger where one could trust no one. In this obscure place, the wanton destruction of Kashmiri lives provoked little to no outrage.

In 2000, Bill Clinton visited India and Pakistan. It was two years after the countries had conducted nuclear tests and one year after they fought a war in Kashmir's northern mountains. On his visit, Clinton said Kashmir was a "nuclear flashpoint." A few days earlier, unknown gunmen had killed 40 Sikh Kashmiris a few miles from my home. India's Prime Minister Vajpayee told Clinton that it was a "primitive act of barbarism" and Muslim militants were "ethnically cleansing" Kashmir (Harding 2000). However, Indian allegations began to unravel soon after when Indian military abducted five Kashmiris and buried their burnt bodies in a nearby forest, claiming they were the "terrorists" responsible for killing the Sikhs. When the bodies were exhumed, they turned out to be civilians, one of them a cloth merchant from our town. The DNA results would later prove the killings had been staged to discredit Kashmiris in Clinton's eyes, but by that time Clinton had left, Bush had become the president and 9/11 had taken place.

As the world watched the falling towers that global news channels were playing on a loop, it wouldn't matter anymore whether a political struggle was genuine or not. Bush's reductive logic of "you are with us or with them" echoed Al-Qaeda's own stark, dystopian world view. Indian defense minister Jaswant Singh offered military bases to the US to launch its attacks in Afghanistan. He connected a hijacking of an Indian plane in 1999 to the 9/11 events, claiming the former to have been a "dress rehearsal" for the latter. In the charged aftermath of 9/11, India linked militancy in Kashmir to "global jihad." It asked the US to disregard the movement in Kashmir and see Kashmir simply through the prism of the "War on Terror." The US acquiesced (Dugger 2001). Yet, India only wanted the West's "understanding," not its actual involvement, and thus made sure to claim that Al-Qaeda was not present in Kashmir.

A wave of rightwing populist politicians arose in the wake of the 9/11 attacks. In the Indian state of Gujarat, six months after 9/11, BJP's Narendra Modi looked away as Hindu rightwing stormtroopers associated with his party carried out a pogrom against the state's Muslims. Despite a years-long ban from entering the US, Modi's eventual rise to becoming India's prime minister happened in the broader context of the global anti-Muslim politics the events of 9/11 occasioned. In 2019, Modi's government, still coasting on anti-Muslim polemic, unleashed a campaign of hatred against Kashmiris before snatching the last remaining constitutional protections for Kashmir and seeding years of new conflict with his settler-colonial policies.

In the world that 9/11 birthed, non-dominant peoples like those in Kashmir were caught between forces they neither shared a worldview with nor had any control over. Al-Qaeda's nihilism was stunningly absurd. America's "War on Terror" spoke in the univocal tone of "liberalism" and as the imperial voice of "civilization," but beneath this rhetoric one could hear medieval fantasies of conquest and disregard for non-Western lives. Closer home, there was the Pakistani state, split between support for militant religious outfits and participating as the "frontline state" in the War on Terror. India moved deeper into Hindu nationalism, violently excluding its Muslim citizenry. In Kashmir, it maintained a violent military occupation in the name of

fighting "terrorism," even though militancy had significantly ebbed. The occupation, without real combatants to fight against, became a self-perpetuating system of brutalization.

The events of 9/11 were morally repugnant and horrific in the annals of criminality, and so was the world of chaos it gave rise to. As John Gray notes, 9/11 brought "apocalyptic thinking" to the center of American politics which the neo-conservatives used to push their geopolitical objectives (2007, 107–117). Less discussed is the fact that in many regions of the world with ongoing repressions, dominant states wielded "9/11" *as a weapon* against the weak. In retrospect, I wonder what would have happened if the attacks, despite their scale, were treated as the criminal acts that they were, rather than as a singular attack on "civilization."[2] The response, as Noam Chomsky (2011) pointed out, would have been to "apprehend the likely suspects" through an "international operation" and bring them to justice through the procedures of law, rather than launch a vengeful, interminable, and steamrolling war phonily named "Enduring Freedom." Instead of being used to further suppress the voices of subdued peoples, it should have provoked a collective rethink about how to build a kinder world, with *modus vivendi* as its key principle.

Notes

1. Interview took place in October 2001.
2. Gray argues that – despite their scale and the role of a global network behind them – 9/11 events were neither unprecedented nor did they mark a "step-change in history." It was a "further development of earlier types of unconventional warfare rather than a qualitative change in the nature of conflict." *Black Mass*, p. 180-181.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Notes on Contributor

Mohamad Junaid is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts. He has a Ph.D. from the Graduate Center, CUNY, with research on violence, youth activists, and political subjectivity in Kashmir. His work on military occupation, history writing, space, and memory has appeared in *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, *Identities*, *The Funambulist*, and several edited volumes and anthologies.

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